

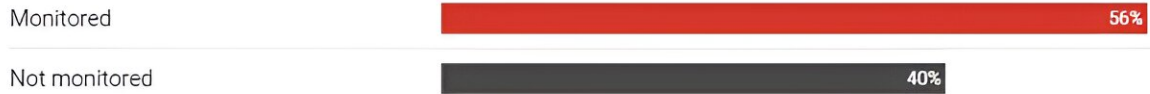
Stress levels in Australian workplaces among the highest as workers battle interruptions and irritating colleagues

October 19 2023, by Libby (Elizabeth) Sander

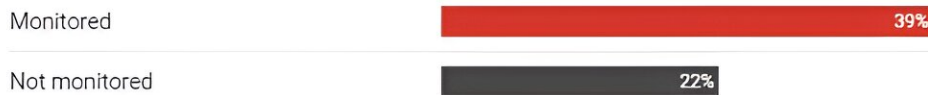
Share of workers reporting feelings associated with burnout

By whether employer uses monitoring technology

Feel tense or stressed during workday



Feel emotional exhaustion



Desire to keep to themselves at work



Do not feel motivated to do their best



Feel irritability or anger toward co-workers or customers



Feel lower productivity



Feel ineffective at work



Credit: Table: American Psychological Association. Source: 2023 Work in America survey

As more companies [mandate](#) the amount of time to be spent in the office, employee stress levels are on the rise.

A recent [study](#) found 34% of employees reported lower mental health levels compared to six months ago. Alarming, 37% also reported decreased levels of engagement and sense of belonging.

So why might the return to the [office](#) be increasing [employee stress](#)? Research indicates a combination of commuting, cost of living pressures, noisy open-plan offices, [work culture](#), interruptions, decreased autonomy and coworker relations are contributing to workers feeling more stressed.

In Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2023 [Report](#), the US and Canada region along with East Asia tied for the highest level of stress at 52%, and Australia and New Zealand had the second-highest rate at 47%. These results maintain the record high set in 2021.

And an analysis of 382,000 employee exit interviews found [reports](#) of employee burnout have almost doubled in the past year.

The return to the office appears to be a contributing factor with [52%](#) of employees preferring flexible/hybrid work to minimize mental health concerns.

So how might returning to the office be making employees more stressed?

Noisy offices are a significant contributor to stress

As staff have returned to the workplace they have been confronted with the thing employees dislike most about open plan offices, according to research: noise.

Noise has significant implications for both employee well-being and performance. Our [research](#) found relatively moderate levels of open-plan office noise caused a 25% increase in negative mood and a 34% increase in physiological stress.

In addition to making employees more stressed and cranky, noisy open-plan offices reduce performance. [Research](#) shows employees in quieter one-person offices perform 14% better on a cognitive task than employees in open plan offices.

Fewer interruptions when working from home

In addition to not having to commute, for many employees, fewer interruptions and less noise from coworkers were some of the key benefits of working from home.

Modern knowledge work requires employees to focus and concentrate for lengthy periods. That is hard to do when colleagues are having impromptu meetings next to your desk, or discussing their weekends as you struggle to hit a deadline.

In many open-plan offices, the drive for increased interaction and collaboration comes at the expense of the ability to focus and concentrate. When distraction makes it hard for employees to focus, cognitive and emotional resources are [depleted](#). The [result](#) is increasing stress and errors, undermining performance.

[Research](#) shows it takes about 23 minutes to get back on task after an interruption. Being constantly interrupted by impromptu questions and random conversation will not only reduce productivity but can lead to [withdrawal](#) from work.

To cope with the unwanted noise and interruptions, increasing numbers

of employees are wearing headphones while they work.

Keeping tabs on your employees

As resistance to returning to the office continues, companies including Meta, Google, JP Morgan Chase and Amazon have [stated](#) they will use technology to monitor building access card data and system usage to track employees who are not complying. Employees have been advised repeated violations could lead to termination.

A recent [study](#) by the American Psychological Association found employees who were subject to monitoring technology were 14% more stressed than those not monitored.

And 42% of employees who were monitored intended to look for a new job within the next 12 months, compared with 23% who were not monitored.

Employees who are monitored while working reported higher levels of feeling they do not matter at their workplace (to their coworkers [32% vs. 17% of those not monitored] or to their employer [36% vs. 22%]), they are not valued (26% vs. 17%), and they are micromanaged (51% vs. 33%).

Commuting is stressful and expensive

The lost time and expense of commuting on top of rising cost of living pressures has been a consistent [theme](#) as to why employees don't want to return to the office five days a week.

The Real Australian Commute Report 2022 [surveyed](#) 5,000 Australians revealing the average cost of commuting per day is now \$20. According

to a recent [study](#) published by Fortune, the time Americans spent commuting in 2022 increased by 239 hours, a 20% jump from 2019 figures.

But it's not just the cost in time and money that is of concern, commuting adds to employee stress. A [systematic review and meta-analysis](#) of the relationship between commuting and stress found objective measures of commuting (distance traveled and time spent) were positively associated with strain outcomes, especially perceived stress.

Our coworkers can be part of the problem

Returning to the office is great for social connection and can lead to a range of positive work outcomes. However, our coworkers can also be a source of [stress](#).

During my research, I am frequently told by [employees](#) of colleagues who eat offensive smelling foods at their desk, make loud sounds while eating, and conduct animated personal phone calls right next to them. Then there are those who wear sweaty gym gear for the rest of the day after working out at lunchtime.

Most [famously](#) perhaps in the annals of annoying colleagues was the case of the employee on a [research station](#) in Antarctica who stabbed a coworker who persisted in telling him the endings of books he was planning to read.

Workplace culture remains crucial

Being back in the office brings the culture of the organization into sharp focus. More than [one in four workers](#) (26%) indicate a toxic work

culture is negatively impacting their mental health.

Employee stress, under performance and turnover are inevitable if organizations are more focused on tasks or just getting their staff back in for face-time for the sake of it, rather than on results. Similarly, if poor leadership is tolerated and understaffing is the norm, low morale and high turnover are likely to follow.

Well designed workspaces that include acoustic treatment, psychological safety, effective leadership, healthy organizational culture, and work arrangements that support autonomy and employee well-being are crucial to reducing [stress](#) and employee turnover.

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